

# Ethnic Vote Could Tip the Balance in British Election

Heenan Bhatti writes from London

## Investment by Expatriates

It has, admittedly, become almost ritualistic on the part of the successive governments to invite potential foreign investors and also expatriate Bangladeshis to invest in Bangladesh for the much-vaunted industrialisation. The last so far to dwell on the subject is none other than Industries Minister Shamsul Islam Khan whose stake in the matter, for obvious reason, is more than anybody else's. The industries minister pleaded for foreign investment, particularly by expatriate Bangladeshis, in Bangladesh much the same way his predecessors made similar crisis calls in equally — maybe more — desperate situations.

Such desperation notwithstanding, the expected industrial miracle so far has not happened nor there is any sign of a change for the better in the attitude of the prospective investors. That indicates something somewhere has gone awfully wrong. Either the Industrial Policy, 1991 has proved inadequate to convince the investors or the potential risks of laying money in productive sector, they reckon, are too great to be overcome. It is not just enough to say that the investment climate in this country is more congenial than ever before.

As for eliciting a favourable response from the Bangladeshis living abroad, the first thing need to be done is to explain in no uncertain terms to them how they will be treated exactly. Very few reports have so far focused on the expatriates' special problems in lining up their money in the country of their origin. The fact that waxing eloquent on the incentive package as a reward for investment in Bangladesh has had more than a fair share without really adding substance to the claim should now be brought under merciless scrutiny.

This done, the next step would be a search for a realistic mechanism for involving in it the interests of all the parties concerned. To do that much is perhaps no alternative to a well-formulated investment council. This council, then, should be backed by an advisory council constituted ideally from various chambers of commerce. The investment council should be responsible for the onerous duty to prepare project proposals, channelise fund for profitable investment in a planned way. Only then will they be able to determine which industry or industries the country should go for or not and confidently ask the investors where to put their money. This confidence is important so far as the country's future industrial scenario is concerned. That the fog shrouding the industrial sector for so long a time can be lifted to a great extent is not an unfounded hope. The need is to look at the issue as a whole and work out as much comprehensive a solution as possible.

In this connection the role of the Bangladesh missions abroad has ever remained less than satisfactory. Contrary to their express arms, our missions — particularly in countries like the UK where a large number of Bangladeshi expatriates live — are yet to seriously look into the possibility of investing in their country of origin. In addition to identifying the potential areas of investment, they can surely concentrate more on overseeing the country's economic interests there. This will, in turn, make the task of channelising more fund to the country's productive sector easier. It is time the government made a serious effort to encourage the expatriate Bangladeshis to invest here.

## The Attack on Status Quo

The electorates in Italy and Germany are up against the ruling parties, the Christian Democrats in both the countries. Elsewhere in western Europe, the change of prime minister has given the Socialists in France a little breathing time. But most independent predictions suggest that the ruling party may lose its parliamentary majority at the next poll. A somewhat more grim forecast comes from Britain which goes to the election today. A hung parliament is a major possibility. Again, no matter which party wins in a probable close race, perhaps not with an absolute majority, Britain may well be shifting from a long era of one party domination to a multi-party coalition.

Other countries in west Europe may be facing the same prospects when they go to the polls.

One common element that runs through all these different events is that in all these countries, stable and democratic, the status quo is coming under attack, if not rejected by the electorate. Reasons vary from country to country. It may be recession in Britain which makes the traditional Tory supporters disenchanted with the ruling party, while a certain lack of credibility of the Labour, resulting from its shift from a left position to the middle, makes the electorate look towards the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for answers to some of the country's problems. "Give us an alternative", the electorate seems to be saying, not too loudly, but in whisper.

Other whispers heard in remaining parts of Europe are hardly encouraging. In both Germany and France, where rightwing parties are threatening the supremacy of the ruling parties, the most volatile issue relates to immigration of foreigners and the influx of the so-called guest workers from Turkey (in the case of Germany) and from North African countries (in France). More immigrants are now likely to come in waves, this time, from East European countries.

Problems are many and complex, some aggravated by the stresses and strains of the end of the Cold War, the break-up of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Europe requires all its heads — and hearts — to tackle the challenges. At this stage, one must wish it well.

LATE last year Conservative Prime Minister John Major held a special dinner at 10 Downing Street. For the first time, he welcomed Britain's leading Asian businessmen to what was seen as the wooing of the ethnic vote.

Major and the Conservatives are not alone. The Liberal Democrats have been supplied with an election aircraft as a result of donations from Asian businessmen. And the Labour Party, whose near-stranglehold on the ethnic vote is on the wane, have also embraced the Asian businessmen.

As Britain's election campaign reached its climax, with a final verdict today, the political reasons become clearer for the overtures from the major parties towards Britain's black and Asian community.

The ethnic vote has taken on a substantial significance because of its growing numbers in marginal constituencies — those seats with the lowest majorities for winning candidates at the last election. These constituencies are vital for victory in an election where the parties are running neck and neck.

According to figures now compiled, 51 of the constituencies have 15 per cent or more black and Asian residents. They make up a clearly defined group of voters who in effect hold a balance of power.

In 16 of these key seats — 10 Labour and six Conservative — the winning candidate's majority was below 10 per cent.

But with such significance riding on the ethnic vote, there is an anomaly between the number of ethnic candidates standing and the proportion of black and Asian people in the population.

According to a recent report, Politics For All, compiled by the Rummey Trust, a leading race relations charity, there should be 90 ethnic candidates, given that black and Asian people make up 4.7 per cent of the population.

**In the British general election campaign the main political parties have vied strongly for the vital black and Asian vote. The groups make up to 4.7 per cent of the British population. But even though ethnic minorities could decide the outcome of this close-run election, few blacks and Asians are standing to become MPs.**

There are only 23 — eight Conservative, nine Labour and six Liberal Democrat. When the election was called, there were only five sitting black and Asian members of parliament — all Labour — and few more are expected to join them as a result of this election.

Says Kaushika Amin, the report's author: "There is an obvious contrast between the words and deeds of the main political parties. Between their formal commitments to involving ethnic minorities in their affairs and the facts of exclusion and marginalisation which many ethnic minority people have experienced in reality."

Lack of candidates aside, certain incidents have enforced this thesis. Last year, black Conservative candidate for Cheltenham John Taylor was involved in a highly publicised incident when one of the seat's Conservative supporters publicly called him a "nigger".

And recently the Conservatives have been accused of playing the "race card" — trying to instil fears about a "flood" of immigration to enhance their position among sections of the white electorate.

The Labour Party — seen by many as the natural home for the ethnic vote — has been accused of not fielding enough black and Asian people. The nine candidates to stand at this election compares with 14 at the last election.

However, the call for increased representation was rejected by black Conservative

candidate in London's Islington North, Lurline Champagne, who said: "Black people do not need to be treated any differently from anyone else."

Members of the other two main parties conceded the lack of black representation meant many of the issues affecting black and Asian people were ignored.

The Asian Labour candidate in Langbath, Ashok Kumar, conceded: "It is important to have black and Asian candidates in parliament. It makes a significant difference in being able to raise black issues."

The Asian Liberal Democrat candidate in Hertsmere, Zarbanoo Gifford, said her party believed it was time for a change in the first-past-the-post electoral system presently used. "Figures show it is important for black and Asian people to fight for proportional representation," she said.

One issue of particular concern to black and Asian people ignored by the main parties is the creation of a frontier-free Europe at the end of 1992 and the position of ethnic minorities within that.

Black MP Bernie Grant said: "The question of Europe is one of the major issues for the future and must be taken up now to prevent any escalation of what is already a terrifying situation."

With greater freedom of movement to all citizens among the 12 European Community (EC) members, fears have been raised over tight internal immigration

## Voters who may be crucial



checks which, it is argued, will lead to black people being seen as illegal immigrants merely because of the colour of their skin.

These fears have been highlighted by the increase in racial violence throughout Europe with the rise of the organised far right. In Britain alone, a racist attack occurs

every 30 minutes, according to government figures.

Britain takes over the EC presidency from Portugal in June. Yet none of the main parties has given any commitment to counter the fears of ethnic minorities in this area.

Moves were made to put the issue of Europe-wide racism on the election agenda,

with black groups making demands in return for black and Asian votes.

Narendra Makanju, a founder of the Anti-Racist Alliance — a group set up to counter the rise in racist attacks — said: "Black and Asian people should judge the parties in terms of what they are going to do about these attacks and the freedom of movement in 1992."

Another aspect of the election debate has been the emergence of separatist parties fighting on their own terms. For instance, the recently formed Muslim Party is contesting five seats in areas with large Muslim populations.

A spokesperson for the party recognised the difficulties in taking on the mainstream parties, but added: "This is laying the seeds for the future. We are not being represented by any of the mainstream parties and therefore have no other choice but to stand."

The frustration of black and Asian people is considerable. Just before the election was announced, London's Stratford school was at the centre of intense media attention over a public row between the Asian governors and the predominantly white staff.

The row, which has involved legal action, is over the way Asian parents and governors believe the school's predominantly Asian pupils should be taught with a more Asian-oriented curriculum.

Although no resolution is in sight, in the context of the election Stratford is a pointer to what may lie in the future.

If the trend set in Stratford is to continue, stronger separatist elements will emerge within Britain's black and Asian community unless some sort of resource to meet their needs is found within the main political culture.

— GEMINI NEWS

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# Nepali Feminists List Property Rights as Leading Issue

Wilhelmina Orozco writes from New York

"So you came to break up our peaceful family."

Such hostility has been one of the reactions to Nepal Feminist Manjula Giri and her friends in their efforts to organise among compatriots in New York.

Feminists are seen as homebreakers, said Ms Giri who formed the New York-based Nepal Women's Association with nine other women.

They would patiently explain that solidarity is important for expatriate women, both for mutual assistance as residents in a foreign land and to help poor women back home.

Advancing the property rights of women in Nepal is the group's current priority.

Manjula, who is working for her doctorate in sociology at the City University of New York, sees her countrywomen's exploitation as rooted in property rights. Property is mainly land, and women — 96 per cent of whom live in rural areas — cannot get an equal share of the land.

"A woman who gets widowed does not take over the family property but only gets a share (equal to) what the son gets. If the couple have no son, the property goes to the husband's brothers," said Manjula. Nothing goes to the daughter if her father dies without a will.

The few women members of Nepal's parliament (only seven of 205 legislators) are all

raising issues such as property rights and protecting women's rights in the Constitution. Other women, too, are speaking out.

To a large extent, this new-found voice developed as women joined the popular struggle which changed Nepal's government from authoritarian to parliamentary.

Despite repression and the fear it caused, women played a great part in the pro-democracy movement. They organised protest rallies and demonstrations independently of political parties. If they were not directly part of the movement themselves, they helped by giving provisions or sheltering those sought by authorities.

"I was here in the United States but I also organised protest rallies, and wrote the (American) President and senators to stop supporting the authoritarian government in Nepal," said Manjula, who is an active member of the Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights, a Nepal organisation based in New York.

It is very important, she said, "that women can now come out into the streets and to organise." The democratic space has spawned many women's organisations of which there are now about 44 — working for literacy, family planning, income-generation, the legal aspects of women's issues and translating legal jargon into simple language for women.

The democratic space has spawned women's organisations working on various issues, including the 'radical' issue of equal inheritance rights

And they have taken up the "radical issue" of inheritance and property rights. "Women who are educated and who live in the cities come to know about feminism. [Media lets them] know what's going on all over the world. This prompts them to think of doing something for their country."

Manjula's own awakening began in her early school years. "I was raised in a village, went to school there and saw the disparity between men and women. It used to touch me as a teenager."

"Later when I worked for the National News Agency of Nepal as its first woman reporter, I felt the resistance of my editors (to the women's issues I tried to raise in my reports). The whole structure was not ready for progressive women."

This only made her more determined to go into gender issues and to strive to be independent. "It was tough, [but] it was worth it because I developed strength," said Manjula.

She then decided to produce a feminist magazine called Sakti (meaning strength) from her own savings, and came out with the first issue in 1983. A collective of

five women helped with all phases of production. "We had difficulty with circulation. But even with a small number of subscribers, we gained in strength because we had a message to share," she said.

With Nepal still under an autocracy at the time, being critical with the patriarchal system was a "tough, challenging job." In 1984, Manjula was invited to New York by the City University of New York's Centre for the Study of Women and Society to talk about Nepal women and to work with the Sisterhood is Global Institute. The magazine folded up.

However, she said, another group of women has since two

years ago been putting out another feminist magazine called Asmita (meaning dignity of women).

Manjula realises the volatile situation in her country, of the danger of government shifting back to autocracy. "Democracy is still very precious to us, we had to pay a price for it. We have to be cautious. But at the moment it is a very good sign, that at least we have the freedom to speak out and organise."

— Depthnews Asia

## To the Editor...

### Civic amenities

Sir, The Prime Minister's assurance to solve the long standing problems of the old areas of Dhaka city during her address at Dholaital crossing on February 16th was indeed heartening. It is also gratifying that a committee has been formed to go into the problems and suggest measures to eradicate them.

The civic problems such as absence of carpeted roads around Dayagonj bridge e.g. Distillery Road and Hathkolia Road in Gandaria and the traffic 'jungle' at Dayagonj bridge crossing, Sarat Gupta Road are only a few to be mentioned. Absence of a good drainage system in many old areas leads to flooding even during dry period. Absence of street lights and lack of economic opportunities for the youth help in growth and sustenance of crimes. Night patrolling by the local police has long been discontinued with resultant robberies and other grave crimes in the area.

We do hope the special committee will not lose sight of the above problems while recommending measures for solution of the old city problems. The authorities may kindly note that old city is still the hub of economic and trading activity and helps in the export of various indigenous

items such as fish and vegetables to earn valuable foreign exchange. It is also contributing greatly to the growth and sustenance of small and cottage industries.

Various authorities such as WASA, BSIC, DCC, PDB, DMP and local bodies can greatly contribute to the development of this area. The relevant ministries can also assist in the funding of the development activities through a co-ordinated and planned effort over a period of time. Attention of the hon'ble Prime Minister is drawn to the above problems.

Ahmed Kamal, Shakti Kamal and Saad Kamal Gandaria, Dhaka.

### Director's fees

Sir, Recently an advertisement was published in a daily newspaper calling for an extraordinary general meeting by a reputed oil marketing company with a single agenda i.e. to increase the Director's Fee from Tk. 400/- per meeting to Tk. 750/- per meeting. Now this public sector oil company had suffered immense damages of its oil installation at Chittagong during the last cyclone of April, 1991 estimating over Taka one crore. The company should curtail expenses at all levels to recoup the losses. It is not understood

how the Board of Directors can ask for an increase of the fees when the company is in economic distress. Further such increase will have effect on other nationalised companies also causing public embarrassment to the government.

I would request the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources and the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation to review the matter before going for such increase of Director's Fees.

Nazmul Islam Chandpur

### Remove confusions

Sir, In my opinion, public trial of the Bangabandhu's killers should be made in order to find out the actual cause (s) behind the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members. Was it a politically motivated killing or murder on personal grudge?

At the same time, inquiry committee should be formed to locate the person (s) actually involved in the assassination of the late president Ziaur Rahman.

These issues have created confusions in our national life. Hence that should be removed through legal proceedings.

M Zahidul Haque Assistant Professor, Bangladesh Agricultural Institute, Dhaka.

## OPINION

### Revival of Senior Service Pool

The administrative system of Bangladesh vis-a-vis the Civil Service of Bangladesh has been beset with many problems. Most of the problems cropped up due to wrong decisions or rather indecision of the government and also, allegedly for its yielding to the unjust pressure of various vested interest groups in the civil service.

Among all these problems, the most crucial has been the appointment of Deputy Secretary and Secretary. It is very unfortunate that within 20 years of independence we could not fix principles and policies for selection in those posts. It would be proper to say that efforts were not made before to frame rules for this purpose.

During the period of Ziaur Rahman, for the first time, efforts were made to remove anomalies from the civil service befitting the need of an independent country. Thus, a unified civil service consisting of a few cadres were created removing all prerogatives and undemocratic privileges for any particular cadre. In tune with this, in 1979, Senior Service Pool consisting of the posts of Deputy Secretary, Joint Secretary, Additional Secretary and Secretary was also constituted and rules were framed for future intake in the pool purely on the basis of merit. There was no 'quota' or 'reserved posts' for any cadre and responsibility for selection was entrusted with the independent and impartial Public Service Commission. Mode of selection included both written and viva-voce examination thus eliminating any chance of bias in the selection process.

But with the demise of Ziaur Rahman and fall of BNP government in 1982, the zeal was lost at the highest level to implement such a democratic system of recruitment. In the meantime, all vested groups within the civil service who did not believe in merit, comprehending the weakness of the autocratic government, did their best to destroy the system of open competition. They compelled the government to abolish the pool with the threat of strike.

It is known to all that the pool was abolished by the past autocratic government purely on political grounds, on the basis of the recommendations

of a committee. In place of merit-based and democratic pool, the committee suggested an unjust quota of the policy posts for different cadres with 65% and 60% of the posts of Deputy Secretary and Joint Secretary respectively kept reserved for BCS (Admn) cadre. It was the most biased and unjust recommendations in the history of civil service reforms in the subcontinent. The share for BCS (Admn) in the proposed quota was in line with the reserved posts for CSP in the former Pakistan. Since the CSPs were the most meritorious group in the civil service, no one had anything to say against it. But the major components of today's BCS (Admn) cadre are members of former EPCS and post independent recruits. They cannot claim to be the rightful successors of CSPs. It is a fact that most of the persons securing top positions in the BCS examinations are in the trend of opting for other services than the BCS (Admn) cadre.

It is sometimes wrongly argued that members of BCS (Admn) cadre has comparatively less promotion prospect outside the Secretariat, so they should be given lions share of these posts. But almost every cadre has got the identical problem of less promotion prospect in the higher echelons which originated from en-masse cadrement, conversion of class II officers into cadre officers and creation of upazila which led to huge proliferation of the base posts in the recent years. On the other hand, even all the policy posts form Deputy Secretary to Secretary are reserved for BCS (Admn), problems of this cadre as regards to promotion will not be solved, because the number of posts at this level are very few. This is the limitation applicable to all cadres since civil service is constituted on a pyramidal structure.

With the fall of General Ershad, implementation of his committee's recommendations was immediately stopped. The Prime Minister, on assuming power, declared to different service associations who went to meet her and also in her address to the nation on a few occasions, that henceforth all senior appointments would be made absolutely on the basis of merit. Majority of the cadre officers (let elated and hoped that all anomalies and injustices would be done away with. There was also high expectation that Senior Service Pool would be revived.

But to the utter frustration of all concerned, nothing has been done so far by the present democratic government to revive the pool. Instead the government recently awarded promotions to a few hundred officers to these policy posts only through interviewing the candidates. Although every cadre got some representation in the Secretariat for the first time, the lions share of these posts went to two cadres — BCS (Admn) and BCS (Secretariat). So obviously the order of the Prime Minister to select officers purely on the basis of merit was not followed.

The quota system and selection process based on interviews and service records have the following demerits: (1) It is undemocratic and does not ensure equal chance of selection for all cadres. (2) Under quota system selection is essentially based on seniority rather than merit and hence fosters patronage and nepotism. (3) The quota system always contradicts merit and hence it is counter productive and inefficient. (4) It is against the very principle of unified service structure. (5) It is prejudiced, biased and morally unjust. (6) It leads to dominance of one cadre over others and serves the purposes of vested interests. (7) It leads to inter and intra-service conflict and rivalry and thus jeopardises the efficient working of government.

Bangladesh is surging ahead for development. The performance at the apex level is bound to put impact on the overall performance of the government. So these posts need to be filled up from amongst meritorious officers of all cadres representing varied functional experience. And to ensure justice and fairness, selection should be made through open competition comprising both written test and viva-voce conducted by the Public Service Commission as envisaged in the 1979 Senior Service Pool order.

Firoz Ahmed Dhanon, Dhaka